

Progress Noted; Much Work to Do

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, September 13 2009 7:00 PM -

It wasn't so much of a new beginning as it was a continuation of the previous end. The Cleveland Browns, unveiling a new head coach, a new starting quarterback and, a new approach, looked too much like the Cleveland Browns of last season, pick the game, in losing to a far more talented Minnesota Vikings team, 34-20. But for a first time in what feels like since the Carter Administration, the Browns offense scored a touchdown. At least there's something to build on. Gary talks about it in his latest.



It wasn't so much of a new beginning as it was a continuation of the previous end.

The Cleveland Browns, unveiling a new head coach, a new starting quarterback and, a new approach, looked too much like the Cleveland Browns of last season, pick the game, in losing to a far more talented Minnesota Vikings team, 34-20.

But for a first time in what feels like since the Carter Administration, the Browns offense scored a touchdown. More on that in a minute.

That the Browns lost to the Vikings was neither surprising nor a shame, nor was the way they lost it. The Vikings are one of the league's more talented teams, with a plethora of good players where good teams tend to have them, on the lines, at the edges and in the backfield.

Adrian Peterson, held mostly in check during the first half, did what great running backs do: wore down the Browns defense through continual pounding and ended the game with 180 yards on 25 carries and 3 touchdowns.

Progress Noted; Much Work to Do

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, September 13 2009 7:00 PM -

I hope you had him in your fantasy league.

The NFL could have done the Browns a favor and scheduled, say, the Cincinnati Bengals or maybe even the Denver Broncos this first week to give the team a fighting chance. Still, this exercise was useful in giving both Eric Mangini and fans alike a decent gauge on where things stand at the moment. Progress has been noted, but there's still much work to do.

In the first place, this team has to improve, dramatically, on offense. Jamal Lewis, either in the last throes or rejuvenated, ran pretty effectively most of the day, gaining 57 yards on 11 carries, even if it was mostly irrelevant 57 yards. The Browns still had trouble finishing drives and putting points on the board.

Brian Daboll meet Rob Chudzinski.

As a measure of their offensive desperation, Quinn and the Browns padded their offensive stats in the last few minutes of what was clearly garbage time in an attempt to merely score a touchdown. It worked. Time to exhale.

As sublime as it was ridiculous, the long national nightmare ended, a mere 416 plays after it started. Brady Quinn hit tight end Robert Royal on a 36-yard pass over the middle for a

touchdown, the team's first in 7 games.

No celebration would follow.

The team never bothered to choreograph anything.

It brought the final score to 34-20 which is far closer than the game actually was.

Though the offense is still non-existent, the game wasn't a complete disaster. For a half, the Browns went toe-to-toe with the Vikings. Running it well against a team that is built to stop the run, the Browns took a 13-10 halftime lead on the strength of a Josh Cribbs' 67-yard punt return and a spirited defense that seemed to have Favre and the Vikings a bit confused. Maybe they were just overconfident.

It's a fine line.

Indeed, things started well enough for the Browns when Vikings head coach Brad Childress tried to be clever with an onside kick to open the game. It might have worked last year. But the attempt to dump it short over the initial line of coverage failed when safety Abram Elam stayed in position and fell on it at the Browns' 49-yard line.

That little slice of discipline, missing so often last year, was a refreshing change.

It also was a refreshing change to see, for a half anyway, a Browns team that could both run the ball and stop the run. Peterson had only 25 yards heading into halftime and the Browns were able to keep the pressure on Brett Favre, the NFL's answer to Roger Clemens, but without the steroids.

After the ill-fated onside kick, the Browns first drive showed more wrinkles than any drive in the preseason. It featured the re-emergence of the "Flash" formation and a nice pass from a scrambling Quinn to Royal as the Browns marched to the Minnesota 20-yard line.

But like so much of what happened last season, the drive failed when a shovel pass from Quinn to James Davis came up well short on 3

rd

and 9.

That led to a 37-yard Phil Dawson field goal and an early 3-0 lead.

The Browns' defense, perhaps revitalized by nose tackle

Shaun Rogers, forced the Vikings into a quick three-and-out. Two runs to Adrian Peterson yielded nothing. That momentum drained quickly when the Browns' next drive fell apart mainly due to a Braylon Edwards illegal block penalty and a shank punt from Dave Zastudil, giving the Vikings the ball at the Cleveland 49-yard line.

It was all the opening they needed, or so it seemed. The Vikings, mostly on the strength of Peterson, marched right back but came up short when Peterson was stuffed for a loss at the Cleveland 2-yard line and Favre and receiver Sidney Rice, apparently reading from completely different playbooks, missed badly on a pass to the corner of the end zone.

The Vikings had to settle for a Ryan Longwell 21-yard field goal.

On the ensuing kickoff, Cribbs put his team in a hole by first fumbling the kick in the end zone and then deciding to run it out anyway, getting back only to the Browns' 14-yard line. It proved to be a nice gift. Quinn fumbled the next snap, was sacked on third down and then

Zastudil's punt was returned by Darius Reynaud to the Cleveland 23-yard line.

A swing pass from Favre to Peterson took it to the Cleveland 2-yard line and from there Peterson finished it off, helping give the Vikings a 10-3 lead early in the second quarter.

It was about this time that the teams of Cleveland Past would have folded the tent and just mailed in the rest of the game. If Mangini accomplishes nothing else, he's accomplished this much. His team quit playing later than most.

On the Browns next drive, they came marching right back only to be denied again and settling for a Dawson 20-yard field goal. For a time it appeared as though the Browns were about to tie the game.

Running mostly at the heart of the Vikings defense set up what appeared to be a Quinn to Braylon Edwards 34-yard touchdown pass.

But Edwards was interfered with by cornerback Cedric Griffin, shoved out of bounds and unable to reestablish

both feet in bounds before making a terrific catch off his shoe tops.

The Vikings challenged the touchdown ruling and was sustained, giving the Browns the ball on the interference penalty at the Vikings 6-yard line.

Lewis got the ball to the three and Cribbs got it to the one on a direct snap but lost two yards when the Browns went back to that well one more time and once too often.

Still, it got the Browns to 10-6.

A Vikings drive with just over two minutes remaining in the half was stymied as the defensive line kept enough pressure on Favre and safety Brodney Pool, coming in on a blitz, sack him back at the Minnesota 9. A short pass brought up fourth down, setting up a Kluwe punt.

The kick sailed into the arms of Cribbs who sprinted down the left sideline for a 67-yard touchdown run.

The next Vikings drive was stymied as well and the Browns had one more chance to score before the half,

taking over with a minute to play. But Quinn and the Browns couldn't move it in the hurry-up offense and had to settle for running out the first half, clinging to a 13-10 lead. Call it foreshadowing.

It was the crushing reality of lowered expectations that visited the second half as the Browns' run defense mostly disappeared and Favre, though still pressured from time to time, managed to complete enough mid-range passes to keep the rest of the defense on its heels.

The Vikings came out in the second half playing as if they suddenly realized that they were up against the Browns and not the Pittsburgh Steelers. Mixing in some nice running by Percy Harvin, who was taking over from a temporarily dehydrated Peterson, with a timely pass interference penalty against cornerback Brandon McDonald, the Vikings took the lead on the strength of a Peterson 2-yard touchdown run.

Longwell added the extra point and the Vikings regained the lead, 17-10.

Now, of course, is when Browns teams of Cleveland Past really did fold. This time would be no different. After a couple of nice runs by Lewis, Quinn attempted to go deep to Edwards.

Either there was miscommunication, with Quinn thinking Edwards was headed to the outside and Edwards thinking the pass was coming inside, or Quinn just threw a really bad pass.

It really matters little as the ball was picked off by Griffin at the Minnesota 18.

The Vikings then came back and continued to pound the ball at the heart of the Browns' defense, effectively mixing in enough passes to keep the defense from crowding the box. It was the right formula as the Vikings put together a 13-play 82 yard drive, culminating with a Favre to Harvin 6-yard pass for a touchdown that helped give the Vikings a 24-13 lead.

Although there was still an entire quarter to play, when a team hasn't scored an offensive touchdown

in nearly 10 months it's hard to imagine exactly how it will overcome an 11-point lead. Alas it couldn't. Whether playing traditionally or in no-huddle mode, the Browns offense is still more stutters than steps.

The Vikings, on the other hand, were able to both shorten the game and widen their lead with that punishing running attack and a Quinn fumble that gave the Vikings the ball at the Browns' 34-yard line. A few Peterson runs that were offset by the Browns' fourth sack of Favre set up another Longwell field goal, this one from 37 yards that gave the Vikings the 27-13 lead with just under 7 minutes left.

Because this wasn't preseason, those last 7 minutes weren't really garbage time, except they were. With the Browns hell-bent on scoring something, anything, the Vikings used

the time first to tee off on Quinn and the feeble Browns' offense and then to make sure that Peterson more than exceeded 100 yards on the ground. Peterson did that and

more taking it 64 yards on one play past a poor tackling, ill inspired defense that helped push the lead to 34-13 and put Peterson at 180 yards rushing for the day.

Armed with their "score or die" mantra, the Browns kept the game going long enough for the Quinn-to-Royal touchdown pass that effectively ended the game.

When it was over, what you were left with was the same lousy aftertaste of too many seasons past. A game that started out with some promise felt too much like almost every other loss last season, with players at the end lacking

focus, committing errors, and going through the motions.

If you look just at that first half, there was a little to be encouraged by. For the most part they showed a little more spirit, a bit more discipline and a bit more preparedness than at any point last season. But when you look at the body of work you also were left with a Browns team that is still woefully short on talent, especially compared to the better teams in the league, and will likely struggle week-to-week.

As for Quinn, he was mostly efficient but mostly ineffective. Under pressure often, Quinn repeatedly overthrew receivers deep and generally had trouble finding any rhythm with the receivers. Now a cynic might

suggest that the lack of playing time in preseason might have had something to do with it, but that's just an inconvenient memory at this point.

Quinn was 21-35 for 205 yards, one touchdown, one interception and one lost fumble.

Favre, the last guy alive who will know when to say when, wasn't great but didn't have to be. With a running attack featuring Peterson and occasionally Harvin and Taylor, the pressure isn't on Favre to raise the team up.

All he does it not have to let it down and he didn't on this day, going 14-21 for 110 yards and one touchdown.

As a measure of some respect, the Browns won the sack battle, 4-3. At least there's something

to build on.

Now the Browns travel to Denver to take on a team that is undergoing its own makeover and beaming a bit from taking the measure of the Cincinnati Bengals, 12-7. Look at it this way. If the Browns can find a way to beat the Broncos next week, they'll hold the tiebreaker advantage against the Bengals.

Again, it's something to build on.